

Perseverance in Prayer  
Luke 11:5-13

Why in the world would anyone dare to wake up his neighbor just to provide a midnight snack for a visitor? Well, in the Ancient Near East, to fail to set something on the kitchen table before a guest would be downright rude, just as unthinkable as it would be for any of us to kick back and put our muddy boots on that same table. Just as your mothers or grandmothers would have been terribly embarrassed not to have some freshly-baked cookies available if a friend dropped by, just so any host would be mortified at his inability to provide hospitality to a traveling guest, no matter the hour of his arrival.

Okay, so does that make the man's friend a jerk because he didn't want to help out? Not at all. Remember, these were the days before electric lights, so getting up in the middle of the night was quite a chore – find the lamp, make your way over to the fireplace and stir up some coals to light it, and then you can rustle around and see if you have any leftovers from the previous day's baking.

But there's one more wrinkle – in the Ancient Near East, most folks lived in very small houses, and most families all slept together on one mat. So if dad gets up, he's going to have an angry wife, some crying kids, and probably a barking dog to contend with as he tries to light a lamp, locate some snacks and open the door. No wonder he hesitates – what father wouldn't? Who knows how long it would take to get everyone settled again?

Okay, so once we understand the background of the parable in verses 5-8, what's the point of it? Jesus seems to be saying that at midnight it isn't friendship that matters so much, but rather persistence – if the man outside the door goes on knocking, he will eventually persuade the man inside to get up and go to all that trouble. Jesus thus uses this parable to encourage all of us to perseverance in prayer.

Now, I don't know about you, but understanding all that isn't exactly comforting, at least not at first glance. For is Jesus saying that God is reluctant to help us? Is He saying that we are hassling God with our prayers for what we need? No, verses 10-13 seem to rule out that idea.

So, what does Jesus mean by telling us this story? Simply this: if being persistent will cause a reluctant friend to go through a lot of hassles to help you, how much more will your Heavenly Father – Who loves you so much and for whom nothing is too difficult – how much more will He respond to your persistent cries for help?

And that's precisely why verse 9 comes next with its admonition to ask, seek, and knock. Moreover, the original Greek makes this point even more clearly, for the meaning of the tense of each of these verbs implies continual action. In other words, we should translate this verse: "Keep on asking, and it shall be given to you. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on

knocking and the door will be opened to you.” The clear implication is that it is persistence in prayer that will be rewarded.

But it’s a lot easier to know the benefits of persistence than to practice it, isn’t it? Sure, in Jesus’ story, the friend with no food may have had to knock at the door for awhile, but no matter how difficult it was for the man inside to get up and go to the cupboard, we can’t imagine the whole process to have taken more than a few minutes.

And that’s small potatoes compared to how long some of the saints have had to wait for answers to their prayers. God told Abraham and Sarah they would have a son, and it took 25 years for Isaac to be born. Isaac pleaded for children for 20 years before Jacob and Esau were born to him and Rebekah.

Joseph spent over two years in prison in Egypt for something he didn’t do. Paul spent two years in prison in Caesarea because of the corruption and procrastination of the Roman governor Felix. These were just some of the people who knew something about the need for persistence in prayer.

And what about us? All these COVID restrictions have been going on since mid-March, and there’s no real end to them yet in sight. Infection rates are still going up around here, and any sort of vaccine or treatment is still months away. So who knows how long it will be before we can pass an offering plate or stop wearing these masks all the time? And who knows how long we’ll have to wait before any of us can give one of those hugs that we all desperately need?

And how long will America continue to be roiled by racial tensions and problems? It’s been 400 years since the first West Africans were enslaved and brought to Virginia to help cultivate tobacco. But in spite of a Civil War, in spite of the occupation of Federal troops, in spite of Jim Crow laws being rescinded and civil and voting rights laws being passed, in spite of affirmative action in hiring and in the awarding of scholarships, and even in spite of millions of white voters putting Barack Obama in the White House, distrust, fear, and even hatred remain on both sides of what seems these days to be a widening divide. 400 years have passed, and white Americans and black Americans are still trying to figure out how to live together in mutual love and respect.

And then there are those personal problems that have been with us forever – the broken hearts and broken vows, the temptations and the despair that just won’t go away, the children who won’t come home, the sickness and pain in our loved ones and in ourselves.

These are the things that make up our prayer lists. And we’ve been praying about some of these individuals and these situations for years, and we’ll probably have to keep on praying about some of them for years yet to come. It is into this context that Jesus’ teaching about perseverance comes. It’s as if He comes and peeks over our shoulder at our prayer list and says – “That’s good. Keep at it.”

But why? Why should we have to keep on keeping on? Why should God keep all of us waiting for answers that we all so desperately need right now?

Well, to answer this question, let's first imagine what would it would mean if we didn't persevere. What if we were to give up on our prayer lists? What would quitting say about our relationship to those on our lists? What would it say about our relationship to God?

After all, we might stop praying about a problem if it just isn't that important to us. We've all had things or people that just fall off the prayer list from time to time. Our lack of remembrance, our lack of persistence in prayer can thus be a brutally honest indicator of our priorities.

But what if we give up, what if we stop praying about something that we know good and well to be God's will? In that case, our lack of perseverance should alert us that our priorities aren't perfectly lined up with God's priorities. Our lack of perseverance could thus be a window into our souls, an indication that some repentance is needed.

But such a lack of perseverance could also point to another sin problem – that of despair. It may be that things have fallen off of our prayer lists not because they are unimportant to us, but rather because we have lost faith that God can do anything about them.

Oh, sure. We confess every Sunday that God the Father is Almighty – that He is all-powerful and can do anything. We say that, but it's all too easy for us to make exceptions in our case. It's all too easy to retreat from Christianity into stoicism, to say that we are just going to have to live with that pain or that temptation or that broken friendship or that habit or that unhealthy desire. A lack of perseverance in prayer for deliverance from these problems may thus indicate a lack of faith in God's power, and thus show once again a serious need for repentance in our lives.

But there's a third thing that a lack of perseverance can show us. For if we stop praying for someone or something, it may not indicate a problem with our priorities. It may not even indicate a lack of faith in God's power. It may point to a lack of faith in God's love. If we quit praying for certain people or certain situations, it may be because we don't think God wants to answer our prayers. We may stop praying because we don't think God cares how much we or our loved ones are hurting.

In short, a lack of perseverance can mean a lack of faith in God's priorities or God's power or God's love – or maybe in all three. Failure to persevere in prayer can thus point to a most serious spiritual problem.

But if that's the case, wouldn't the opposite also be true? Wouldn't it stand to reason that perseverance in prayer would indicate the presence of faith in God's priorities and God's power and God's love? Wouldn't perseverance in prayer thus be a great sign of spiritual health?

Sure it is, and in fact, Jesus points out that the tremendous blessing inherent in such persistence. Look carefully at verse 10. For here, Jesus doesn't say, "everyone who asks will receive" – future tense. Instead, he says, "everyone who asketh receiveth" – and that antiquated English grammatical construction means exactly the same thing as the original Greek present tense – it means continuing action. The very act of asking means we are receiving something. The very act of seeking means that we are finding something.

What could that possibly mean? Well, it turns out that perseverance in asking and seeking not only indicates that we are trusting in God's priorities and God's power and God's love, and thus that we have a healthy relationship with God. Asking for anything requires admitting that we can't handle our problems on our own. Seeking anything requires admitting that we are missing something that we need. Asking and seeking thus indicate an awareness of our helplessness, of our complete dependence on God. And as we keep on asking, seeking, and knocking, we necessarily accept God's timetable, instead of trying to impose our agenda on Him.

In other words, if we are going to keep waiting for God to answer our prayers, the very fact of our waiting indicates a belief that our prayers are in accordance with God's will, that only God can in fact answer them, and that God desires to give us what we need. Our perseverance in asking and seeking and knocking is thus an excellent indicator of what we have already received from God: faith.

And Jesus concludes this passage by pointing out that such persevering faith is, in fact, justified. And just as He did in the story of the two friends at midnight, He makes this point by arguing from the lesser to the greater: "You fathers know how to give good gifts to your children. You would never give them anything harmful if they were to ask for something good. Don't you think your Heavenly Father will do the same?"

In other words, Jesus encourages us to perseverance in prayer by pointing both to God's ability to help us and to God's willingness to help us. He thus urges us to persevere because of who our Heavenly Father is – because of God's power and because of God's love.

Remember that long prayer list we were thinking about a few minutes ago? Do you honestly think any of those problems in our world, in our community or in our families are too hard for the God Who spoke the universe into existence with a Word? Do you think that there's any sin or sickness or problem inside you that God can't fix? After all, this is the same God Who custom-made you, the same God Who composed the code of your DNA so that you would be different from every person who ever lived but also so that all of us, rich and poor, black and white, would at the same time reflect the image of our common Creator. Could any of the chaos in our world or the crises in our lives possibly be outside of His control?

Moreover, would any of us dare to imagine that the God Who suffered the unspeakable pain of crucifixion could possibly be indifferent to the pain in our lives? Can we imagine that the God Who sacrificed His only Son, the God Who poured out His own blood to save us would hold back from us anything that we need? Standing as we do in the shadow of the cross, how can any of us doubt God's love for us?

But best of all, Jesus points out that we don't have to keep on waiting for the best of God's gifts. Remember, just last month we celebrated Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God Himself, on all those who believe, all those who trust in Christ alone for their salvation. And in verse 13 Jesus promises that our Heavenly Father will give the same divine gift, the gift of Himself to all His children. And to receive this gift we don't have to wait – we just have to ask.

So keep on asking, and it will be given to you. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and it will be opened unto you. Keep on keeping on – keep persevering in prayer. But let that perseverance be based on trust in the Almighty God who loves you. And let that perseverance spring from and be nurtured by the power of the Holy Spirit, God's greatest gift to you. Response

Postlude